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## Willy Wonka to Wind in the Willows: how children's books reveal inequality

As kids, reading offers an early insight into the forces of class and poverty that can shape our adult lives. Caroline Lucas, Danny Dorling, Nikesh Shukla, Laurie Penny and Juno Dawson share the children's books that influenced them

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Danny Dorling



I first learned about inequality from books, but not from righteous polemics or academic screeds. I didn't get incensed by [The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists](#) or [The Road to Wigan Pier](#) as a teenager. What I read were children's stories, and from them I gained a sense of just how bad we humans had been and could be. I learned to read late, so perhaps came to classic children's stories a little older than most. Or perhaps they were read to me with a little more emphasis on the inequalities they revealed. Growing up in the 70s and early 80s, the stories we learned at school were lessons in snobbery and arrogance, albeit often inadvertently.

Think of all those children's stories that featured animals. Almost always they could talk, and their species signified their rank and allegiance in the order of things. [Inequality](#) was being explained in these stories, usually as being inevitable and for the good, the natural order of things. Children were taught to be careful when mentioning such subjects. If you don't believe me, then maybe the next few words will remind you?

*'What lies over THERE' asked the Mole, waving a paw towards a background of woodland that darkly framed the water-meadows on one side of the river.*

*‘That? O, that’s just the Wild Wood,’ said the Rat shortly. ‘We don’t go there very much, we river-bankers.’*

*‘Aren’t they – aren’t they very NICE people in there?’ said the Mole, a trifle nervously.*

*‘W-e-ll,’ replied the Rat, ‘let me see. The squirrels are all right. AND the rabbits – some of ‘em, but rabbits are a mixed lot. And then there’s Badger, of course. He lives right in the heart of it; wouldn’t live anywhere else, either, if you paid him to do it. Dear old Badger! Nobody interferes with HIM. They’d better not,’ he added significantly.*

*‘Why, who SHOULD interfere with him?’ asked the Mole.*

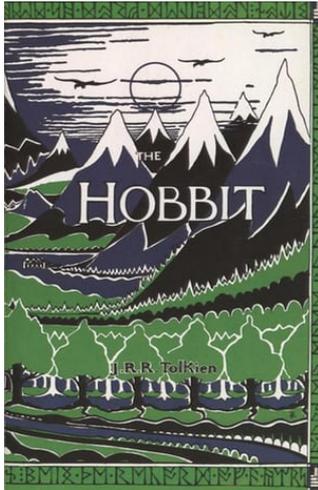
*‘Well, of course – there – are others,’ explained the Rat in a hesitating sort of way.*

*‘Weasels – and stoats – and foxes – and so on. They’re all right in a way – I’m very good friends with them – pass the time of day when we meet, and all that – but they break out sometimes, there’s no denying it, and then – well, you can’t really trust them, and that’s the fact.’*

*The Mole knew well that it is quite against animal-etiquette to dwell on possible trouble ahead, or even to allude to it; so he dropped the subject.*

[The Wind in the Willows](#) was published in 1908, shortly before the first world war and the Russian Revolution. Kenneth Grahame assumed that the affluent families reading his book would not be on the side of the weasels, stoats and foxes, and would be trying to ensure that the rabbits stayed in line. Much later, in 1972, the rabbits would be allowed to experiment with organising themselves in [Watership Down](#) – but let’s not get ahead of ourselves. Although children read most of their childhood stories in roughly the same few years, those stories tend to have been written generations apart so they are reading (or being read) stories from different eras.

A generation after *The Wind in the Willows* came [The Hobbit](#), in 1937. John Tolkien’s star was a diminutive human, a common halfling, Bilbo Baggins. Bilbo knew his place and played his part; alongside many dwarves, some elves and the occasional man. The evil ones here were the extremely dehumanised orcs, ogres and goblins. Again, the world is presented to children as if there is a natural order of things but now that order is under threat. By the conclusion of the Rings trilogy, humans are top dog and everything is again in its rightful place – including restoration of the shire’s green belt (I thought Tolkien was writing about Oxford and Oxfordshire, and showing his dislike of the city’s car factory and the then new council housing).



A decade after *The Hobbit*, in the aftermath of the second world war, another English writer would publish *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Again the animals all played allotted roles, but now there were four children, two boys and two girls, destined to be kings and queens by dint of their species. They went to boarding schools, spoke well, wore ties, and all was well when they sat upon their thrones. Six more stories followed, [the last of which carried a particularly unsubtle anti-Islamic message](#).

Not all the children's books available to me were written by men of a certain age, a particular background and political predisposition. Ursula Le Guin published the [first of the six Earthsea books](#) in 1968, the year I was born. In these books the heroes are not always white, and success is not always about maintaining some arbitrary hierarchy. More important considerations took precedence than ranking and being on-top, such as the environment or harmony. Her books were written in the 1960s and not in England.

Philip Pullman's [His Dark Materials](#) trilogy and JK Rowling's [Harry Potter](#) series came much too late for me, but the pattern has continued. Philip and Joanne were writing in a Britain that was becoming more unequal; their writings reflect some of that. Much older children's authors who grew up in times of even greater inequality and who thought they might have benefitted from these injustices tended to implant message in their stories that supported their views too. When their books are read decades later in a very different context, even a child cannot help but notice the prejudice. Similarly, progressive messages shine through decades later.

If you have a very young child then Andy Stanton's [You're a Bad Man Mr Gum](#) is brilliant. Published a year before the financial crash it features at one point the figure of "a businessman in a grey suit who never smiled and

told lies all the time”. Mix that with the warnings in Suzanne Collins’ [Hunger Games](#) trilogy and the future could be much brighter than we think, if today’s children heed all these warnings they are now reading.

It’s not so common now for children to receive the subliminal message that if they follow orders and know their place, all will be well. The next generation will not fall for the right-wing politician’s trick of asking to be trusted because they are clever and know about things like “the economy”, “Brexit”, “housing”, “health” or your “school”. They never properly smile and they tell lies all the time – in great contrast to politicians who look like Father Christmas after he has had some exercise.

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Photograph: [www.ronaldgrantarchive.com](http://www.ronaldgrantarchive.com)

Caroline Lucas



[Charlie and the Chocolate Factory](#), Roald Dahl’s masterpiece which was first published in 1964, isn’t just a story about inequality. It’s a tale about justice too. I remember reading it as a child and not only being captivated

by Charlie's adventure but also shocked by the heartbreaking poverty that the Bucket family experienced, especially in comparison with the other children who won a golden ticket.

The book begins with a hopeless scene of poverty. In Charlie's tiny house "life was extremely uncomfortable for them all", especially in the winter when "freezing cold draughts blew across the floor all night long". That image of four grandparents sharing a rickety old bed has stuck with me, as I'm sure it has with so many others.

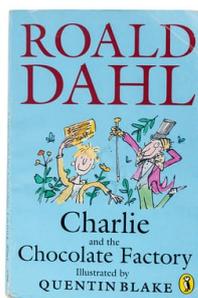


## Charlie and the Chocolate Factory at 50

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The working life of Charlie's father is striking too, and brilliantly highlights not just the drudgery of work for so many people, but the persistent injustice of wages not being enough to support a family on. Mr Bucket worked in a toothpaste factory where he "sat all day long at a bench and screwed the little caps onto the tops of the tubes of toothpaste". But, as Dahl put it: "a toothpaste cap-screwdriver is never paid very much money, and poor Mr Bucket, however hard he worked, and however fast he screwed on the caps, was never able to make enough to buy one half of the things that so large a family needed. There wasn't even enough money to buy proper food for them all". Of course, working people not being paid enough was a reflection on life in the middle of the last century. It's doubly tragic to reread these passages today, [when 60% of Britons in poverty are in working families](#).

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory isn't just doom and gloom, and once Charlie finds that last golden ticket things start looking up. A large part of the excitement is being with little Charlie as he witnesses the wonder of Mr Wonka and his inventions. But I would be lying if I didn't admit that part of the thrill is also seeing the gluttony of the other children landing them in hot, er, chocolate.



Photograph: Alamy Stock Photo

Veruca Salt is the worst. She's the girl "whose father bought up half a million chocolate bars and then made the workers in his peanut factory unwrap every one of them until they found a Golden Ticket!" But justice is served sweetly to the intensely annoying Ms Salt, when a posse of squirrels send her where "all the other bad nuts go" – down the rubbish chute.

In many ways Charlie and the Chocolate Factory is a classic "rags to riches" story, with added sugar. Sadly we know that injustice in the world isn't fixed by golden tickets or eccentric factory owners gifting their assets to children by means of a chat in a glass elevator. But this story stuck with me in part because at its heart is a sense that we shouldn't just be looking to end poverty, but to have bigger dreams too. Perhaps it's the children's equivalent of that famous old slogan by [Rose Schneiderman](#): "The worker must have bread, but she must have roses, too."

The end of the book is joyous. After crashing through the roof of their house in the elevator, Charlie and Mr Wonka tell the family that a new life in a chocolate factory awaits them. The grandparents aren't immediately thrilled:

*Grandma Georgina screamed. And the lift rose up off the floor and shot through the hole in the roof, out into the open sky. Charlie climbed on to the bed and tried to calm the three old people who were still petrified with fear. 'Please don't be frightened,' he said. 'It's quite safe. And we're going to the most wonderful place in the world!' 'Charlie's right,' said Grandpa Joe. 'Will there be anything to eat when we get there?' asked Grandma Josephine. 'I'm starving! The whole family is starving!' 'Anything to eat?' cried Charlie, laughing. 'Oh, you just wait and see!'*

And there it ends. A tale of poverty and hardship counterposed with greed and comeuppance for the lucky few – and ending with three generations flying through the air in a glass box with a chocolatier who most of them have only just met. It might not be a Dickens or Piketty, but Charlie and the Chocolate Factory is a classic tale about inequality and should be on the reading list of everyone who's fighting injustice.

Nikesh Shukla



The way Peter Parker is haunted by the murder of his Uncle Ben in the [Spider-Man comics](#), and his own accidental causing of said death, was one of the first times I confronted an injustice in fiction, [albeit one that was complex and layered](#). Uncle Ben's mantra – that with great power comes great responsibility – was one of the key drivers for Parker's vigilante double life as Spider-Man, and the comics always did well dealing with dualities: Parker's double life, as unsure student and cocksure superhero; his responsibilities at home and his responsibilities to the citizens of New York; his need to earn money and his making said money from exploiting his own heroism. And each time his actions, his fight against crime, impacted on his own life: from the death of Gwen Stacy to Aunt May's ill-fated marriage to Doctor Octopus, it was always Parker's guilt and resolve that kept him going, and me coming back issue after issue.



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Spider-Man comics offered the writer Nikesh Shukla one of his first insights into injustice  
Photograph: Alamy

Laurie Penny



I grew up in the golden age of late-1980s children’s literature, when artists were gleefully giving pre-schoolers permission to side with the underdog and challenge stereotypes. My first favourite book was about a literal underdog: *Hangdog, the loneliest dog in the world*, by Graham Round. It’s the utterly bizarre story of a scruffy little basset hound who can’t make friends no matter how hard he tries because he has such a grumpy, growly face. So he builds a boat and sails away to a desert island. There he meets a terrifying tiger who is lonely because everyone thinks he wants to eat them. “And the two friends take tea together under the moon”. Come to think of it, that explains quite a lot about my adult relationships.

Juno Dawson



When I was still a primary school teacher, a bookseller (from sadly defunct Borders) suggested I share [Malorie Blackman’s \*Noughts & Crosses\*](#) with my class of 11-year-olds. I’ve praised this book so often and so fervently that I’m sure Malorie is close to taking out a restraining order. One scene in particular stands out. In a race-flipped parallel world where white people are inferior to a ruling class of black people called Crosses, white Callum cuts his hand. All that black Sephy can offer is a dark brown plaster, the same colour as *her* skin. Drawing attention to something as small as a Band-Aid opened my eyes to how many other small, but nonetheless infuriating, inequalities there are in the world. Little tiny things that let all sorts of minorities know – this world isn’t, first and foremost, designed with you in mind.

*Tomorrow: Sarah Perry, Jeffrey Sachs, Monica Ali and more on the books that opened their eyes to inequality.*